Building University Linkages with the Private Sector to Improve Agribusiness Management Training

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Introduction: Many national development strategies in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) now emphasize agricultural led, market oriented economic development. These strategies acknowledge that forging closer linkages between agriculture and the private sector is important to sustaining economic growth. Yet in many of these same countries, there is a lack of trained business managers with knowledge of agriculture, and institutions to provide this type of training. Historically, institutions of higher agricultural education in SSA focused on training students for employment in the public sector. To achieve new national development objectives, these institutions will need to develop and deliver innovative programs that contribute to agribusiness sector development. This will require stronger linkages with the private sector to ensure that programs are practical and business-relevant.

Methods: In recognition of the need to reorient its curriculum, research and outreach activities to service the needs of agribusiness, Makerere University’s Faculty of Agriculture (MUFA) initiated a new Masters Degree Program in Agribusiness Management (MABM) in 1999. The MABM program was undertaken with support from an institutional partnership project with The Ohio State University. The goal of this pilot project was to strengthen agribusiness management training in the Faculty of Agriculture by promoting effective partnerships with agribusiness stakeholders. The main objective was to demonstrate how meaningful private sector inputs to Makerere’s teaching, research and outreach efforts might result in a training program that was more business relevant and produce students in high demand from the private sector.

Major Points to be Shared: The project’s implementation strategy (model) consisted of a series of activities, designed to build on each other, phased-in over a three year period. Activities included a survey of agribusinesses, creation of an Agribusiness Advisory Committee (AAC), launching of agribusiness internships, introduction and development of agribusiness case studies, invited participation by agribusiness managers in the classroom, and the provision of agribusiness outreach training programs. The rationale behind each of these activities and outcomes will be described.

Lessons learned and conclusions: The project was judged by private sector participants and MU students, faculty and administrators to have made significant contributions to the MABM program. The AAC has been recommended for continuation. New pedagogical tools including internships, stakeholder classroom presentations and the introduction of case study methodology increased the relevance of the training program. Despite a skeptical faculty, the private sector has been very supportive of project activities. Faculty learned that working with the private sector was not incompatible with traditional academic duties and the private sector learned that Universities are vital resources for development of the agricultural sector.
**Educational importance:** It is important for institutions of higher agricultural education to build partnerships with the private sector if they are going to contribute to sustainable agricultural development. This program demonstrated effective modalities for reorienting traditional university based agricultural programs towards building strong linkages with the private sector and can potentially be replicated in other departments.